

How Will I Explain Henry? An 1837 Family Reunion

How will I explain Henry? Mary Ann Barley turned the question over in her head, again and again, as the mail cart bounced along the dusty, rutted track. No answer came to her. How does one explain a child conceived in loneliness when your husband has been transported to the other side of the world? She had never expected to see him again, never expected she would have to explain.

And now they were almost at South Creek. *How much had William changed in the past eight years? Was he still the man she had once loved, or had his experiences hardened him? What if he refused to accept her beloved little Henry?*

She reminded herself that it was William who had petitioned for her and their three children to be brought to the colony. *That must mean something.* But he didn't know she was also bringing a fourth child. *How will I explain Henry?*

"Is he expecting us?" young Will asked. She could see that he was worrying and wished she could reassure him that it would all work out.

"I think Father knows we're coming, although he doesn't know when. There was no way I could send him a message from Sydney."

She had tried to encourage them, but none of the children could bring themselves to refer to William as "Father". They had been without a father for so long that it was understandable. She hoped they would adjust, with time, as she so wanted them to be a family again. *But how will I explain Henry?*

Little Henry was asleep, his sweaty head resting on her lap. Will was silent again, deep in thought. The two girls were listless and quiet. Earlier in the day they had been excited to be on the last stage of their long journey. There were so many new things to see. Mary had been the first to spot the kangaroos resting under one of those strange tall trees that seemed to be all branches and few leaves.

The heat was oppressive and so unexpected. If it was like this in February, what would it be like when the real summer came in a few months' time? Everything about this country was different – the screeching flocks of parrots, the flat dusty wide open spaces without fences or hedgerows, the dark brooding mountains in the distance. Even the crickets here didn't chirp properly – they made an unending shrill noise that made her head hurt. The sheep ought to be the same, but they were not the black-faced, black-legged sheep back home in Suffolk.

Home. She stopped herself. *This is my home now. For the sake of the children I have to make it work.* She could not have gone on much longer in Kelsale, dependent on the parish poor fund just to survive. She'd been told that William was free now, that he had a job as a stockman and could support her, that this was a great place to make a fresh start. But she didn't dare raise her hopes too high.

The children needed a father, especially young Will. He was ten now and she worried that he was running wild, that he would get himself into trouble. The girls were much easier: Mary was like a mother to little Sarah. And then there was Henry, her happy child who embraced life, who might be her undoing. *How will I explain Henry?*

William was tending to his horse when he heard the cart. It stopped. He turned and saw the woman and children on the cart. He looked puzzled for a moment. Then his face lit up. He broke into a run, bounding over the rough ground towards the track, his hat flying from his head.

It took Mary Ann a few moments to recognise him. She had last seen him in the lock-up, looking pale, thin and unshaven. So different to this tanned, well-built man with a bushy beard who was running towards them. He might have been eight years older, but he looked so healthy, fit and strong. *Is this really William?*

"You're here!" William shouted. "At last you're here."

They clambered down from the cart and the driver handed them their few possessions. The children hung back, not knowing what to make of this exuberant stranger. Henry was hiding behind his mother's skirts.

Mary Ann couldn't speak. *It is so good to see him. But...* She busied herself with the bags, delaying further conversation.

"Let me do that. But first let me see my little ones."

She had rehearsed with the children how they should greet him, that they should address him as "Father". Perhaps it was too much to expect of them. Mary tried a stiff, polite smile, as if being introduced to an elderly aunt. Will scuffed his feet in the dust and wouldn't look up. Sarah simply stared, keeping close to her mother.

"None of them remember you William. It's going to take time."

The eager smile had drained from his face. She could see he had been looking forward to this moment for so long.

Five-year-old Henry suddenly emerged from behind her skirts.

"And who's this?" William asked, a little surprised. It was the moment she had dreaded.

"This is my son Henry", she replied, hesitantly.

"Father" Henry cried suddenly, running towards him. William reached out and lifted Henry up, high in the air. Henry squealed with delight.

"Let's get up to the hut and get you settled. Then young Will here can help me with the horses."

Later that night, after the children were at last asleep, Mary Ann sat with William outside the hut, under the huge spread of unfamiliar stars.

"Let me explain about Henry", she said, still not sure what she was going to say next.

"No", he stopped her. "I did the wrong thing. If God has blessed us with this child, it must be a sign of His forgiveness." He paused, then whispered in her ear "Perhaps in time He will bless us again?"

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